DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 874 CS 217 825

AUTHOR Cullum, Linda
TITLE Centering the Teaching of Writing: Using Writing Center Theory and Practice in a Graduate Course in Teaching Writing.
PUB DATE 2001-11-00
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (91st, Baltimore, MD, November 15-20, 2001).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Objectives; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Instructional Innovation; Masters Programs; Teacher Student Relationship; *Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Laboratories
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Theory; Tutor Role

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a course taught by the author/educator in summer 2001, after a challenge from her department head to come up with a strategy to attract graduate students to a Master of Education course in Teaching Writing, a course that had failed to run for the previous five years because of low enrollments. The paper explains that a "fresh approach" to the course was needed--the fresh approach chosen was to design the course around Writing Center theories and practices. It first considers the unusual physical circumstances of the center and the disparate group of students who signed up for the course. It then discusses what the students brainstormed as the five main ingredients to teaching writing successfully: the teacher delivers clearly explained, process-oriented instruction; students produce careful, "correct" work; the curriculum gets covered; an atmosphere of respect for the teacher and his/her authority is maintained; and there is more writing but less grading. The paper states that the course focused on writing theory, best writing practices, individual writing histories, community-based writing, and similar issues; additionally, the students studied Writing Center theory; worked on tutor practicum projects; observed actual tutoring sessions in the Writing Center; spent time consulting with one another about their own papers; and engaged in ongoing reflection about what works and does not work when the goal is to produce better and more meaningful writing. The main focus of the paper is the new understandings that the author/educator and her graduate students took away from the summer course. (Contains a 15-item select bibliography.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 461 874

Centering the Teaching of Writing: Using Writing Center Theory and Practice in a Graduate Course in Teaching Writing.

By Linda Cullum

Kutztown University

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (91st, Baltimore, MD, November 15-20, 2001)

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

L. Cullum

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS 217 825

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Centering the Teaching of Writing:

Using Writing Center Theory and Practice in a Graduate Course in Teaching Writing

This paper focuses on a unique course that I taught in the Summer of 2001, although the story actually begins the previous Spring, when my department head came to me with a challenge. Could I, she wondered, come up with a strategy to attract graduate students to a Masters of Education summer course in Teaching Writing, a course, I should mention, that had failed to run due to low enrollments for the last five years. "No problem," she said, when she saw my skeptical expression. Just find an interesting new approach and they will come!

As the Writing Center Director at my institution--a four year public university with about 8,000 students--it didn't take me long to settle on what this fresh approach might be: to design the course around Writing Center theories and practices. And then a couple of serendipitous events occurred that really solidified my plan. For one, the roof--literally--fell in on the Writing Center when the room above us began to leak copiously, prompting an array of hanging tarps, drainage hoses, and buckets of gray water. As a result, the Center was quickly allowed to re-locate in a space twice as large, and given free access to the warehouse, enabling us to re-decorate as cozily as possible with an assortment of retro sofas, tables and chairs, and loveseats. Faculty contributions of an unwanted coffee maker, microwave and refrigerator completed our new "faux Starbucks" look.

Second, the Writing Center was scheduled to stay open that summer for the first time,

mainly to accommodate entering freshmen in a developmental summer intensive program. Since there would be only a slight overlap in the times that the Writing Center would be open and my class would be held, this also encouraged me to actually hold the class in the Center, to use the Writing Center as both a physical and theoretical space in which these graduate students and practicing teachers could reenter the conversation about writing.

While the course did run, the challenges that still lay ahead of me were apparent that first night when I met the graduate students with whom I would be spending the next six weeks. They were a disparate group, in age, in years of teaching experience, and in expertise with language arts, since some were strictly high school and middle school English teachers, while others taught a variety of classes. But what they shared was an unmistakable apprehension as they sat rigidly in the Writing Center, crammed around the tables and chairs, carefully avoiding the other seating options. After some introductions and considerable effort to get them to relax, I asked them to brainstorm individually and then discuss together what they would consider the five main ingredients to teaching writing successfully. Here is what they came up with:

*the teacher delivers clearly explained, process-oriented instruction

*students produce careful, **correct** work

*the curriculum gets covered

*an atmosphere of respect for the teacher where his or her authority is maintained

*there is more writing but less grading

Clearly the thrust was on both teacher and students doing their respective jobs. The teacher teaches, the students learn, and unfortunately in many schools today--despite our paradigm shift to a student and learning-centered pedagogy--rarely the twain shall meet. After this exchange, on which we concluded our first evening together, I cheerfully encouraged them to return the next night and pick a comfortable spot. It took them a while to relinquish their traditional view of what a "class" looks like, but eventually they did vary their seating patterns--which I came to think of as kind of an objective correlative to their thought patterns--shifting seating options readily and regularly as their mood struck them. In addition, we soon (at their suggestion) began branching out to meeting at other places on campus as well. We became a moveable classroom in the best sense, talking in library conference rooms and conversation areas, the coffee shop, and the computer lab, always aware of the impact that physical space inevitably has on mood and psychic energy.

Now don't get me wrong. There was nothing radical about the course. Designed to blend composition theory and practice, it focused on writing theory, best writing practices, our own writing histories, community-based writing, and similar issues. But I truly believe that it was the physical and ideological grounding of the course in Writing Center approaches that made it so effective, that led, as the students assured me that it had, to serious changes in their own approaches to teaching writing. For in addition to the aspects mentioned above, these students also studied Writing Center theory; worked on tutor practicum projects; observed actual tutoring sessions in the Writing Center; spent

time consulting with one another about their own papers; and engaged--as tutors always do--in ongoing reflection about what works and doesn't work when your goal is to produce better and more meaningful writing. And that brings me to the main focus of this paper: the new understandings that my graduate students and I took away from this summer course.

First, and perhaps most dramatically, these teachers realized that although they all endorsed process writing in some form, they were keeping *themselves* aloof from their students' writing, stepping in only to make summative and evaluative pronouncements. So one essential aspect that we worked on together was how to join that process more completely. For example, we focused on the importance of reviewing drafts, preferably with each student, and structuring comments in a non-evaluative, non-summary way, using Peter Elbow's *Everyone Can Write* as our model. As Elbow reminds us, there is no point in commenting on a finished product; rather, we need to join the students in the process, when the stakes are high (and ideally when the product really matters to them for reasons more than a good grade). After all, in the Writing Center, when do we ever see a completely finished paper?

We also turned serious attention to what happens when we *do* talk to our students about their writing. The teachers in my graduate class, and I don't think that they are unique, expressed an anxiety about the writing conference, confessing that they were uncomfortable at the thought of really discussing a piece of writing, preferring to focus on the things they know, such as comma splices and paragraph length. But as they

watched tutoring sessions, they realized other options for responding to writing, such as genuine questioning and requests for clarification that require thoughtful response from the writer, as opposed to the kinds of questions teachers often ask--what Courtney Cazden calls "requests for display" or "test questions" (1988) that ask for responses that correspond to an answer the teacher already has in mind and that usually strike fear in even the most successful student.

Because the writing center conference shares so much more with naturally occurring conversation that does classroom talk, the graduate students could also observe how the linguistic behaviors that are a staple of the classroom might subvert their attempts to connect with their students during one-on-one time. For example, as teachers, it is usually our responsibility, however tacitly we assume it, to monitor and even control all of the verbal happenings in the classroom: we call for and evaluate responses; we talk at least two-thirds of the time; we initiate almost all interactions; we feel free to interrupt but are rarely (legitimately) interrupted ourselves; we pace the give and take of the talk ; and so on.

But these are precisely the strategies, however necessary one might judge them to be in the classroom, that will subvert a good draft conference. By watching actual consulting sessions, the graduate students came to realize--as all good writing center tutors already know--the value of listening; the necessity of asking questions only when they *didn't* know the answer; the wisdom of not marking up a draft or appropriating a student's language; and in general relinquishing authority in this new role. Ben Rafoth's *A Tutor's*

Guide and Gillespie and Lerner's *Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* guided us in this conversation about consulting strategies.

While the teacher certainly still has an agenda in a draft session--for example, she works to focus her responses, to give valuable feedback, and to motivate the student to keep going, the linguistic features take on a much more positive aspect--more "exploratory" (Cazden 1988) or what Susan Townsend (1993) calls "wondering discourse," characterized by increased conversational flow as well as periods of quiet and a general increase in positive body language, including smiling, head nodding, and general assent terms on both sides of the table. Terry Meier (1985) provides an interesting gloss on the presence or absence of this kind of body language, suggesting that a student will show such signs only when she perceives herself as an important member of the conversation and thereby entitled to make a metalinguistic comment on how well the discussion is going.

Of course, in the interests of ambiguity, we also problematized the conference, using Laurel Black's *Between Talk and Teaching* to alert us to the real contradictions inherent in a teacher conference, as opposed to a truly peer centered session. For as Black points out, conferencing should really be considered a separate speech genre, not quite instruction but not really conversation either, with the power differential impossible to ignore.

And this led us to another focus of the course--the benefits of the peer-centered writing

workshop--once again something that I think most of us are becoming comfortable with on the college level, but still not often an integral part of the middle and secondary school curriculum. This was another area about which the graduate students had high anxiety, and this time I took several pages from my Writing Center practicum to work through some of their concerns about conducting writing workshops. For example, we watched a peer group video *Beginning Writing Groups* that I always show my tutors to illustrate one approach. The students and I workshopped our own writing and reflected on our experiences as both tutor and tutee, which is something else I always require my tutors to do. They also did some role playing of scenarios that they predicted might occur in their classrooms--such as a disproportionate effort on the part of certain group members and/or gender inequities--which is another standard activity in our practicum.

Inevitably, part of the conversation in any course in Teaching Writing involves grammar and punctuation--when to teach it, if at all, and the best practices for doing so. By now we know that grammar is hard if not impossible to teach, and moreover, that when we do teach grammar, it must be in the context of an actual piece of writing. But this isn't as obvious as it may seem, at least not to high school and middle school teachers who are faced with pressures to teach the standardized tests and keep those scores high. Nancy Greenberg's research several years back, for example, showed that although it doesn't do anyone any good to use exercises, the majority of school teachers were still relying on "skill and drill." But once again, by reading error theorists such as Peter Elbow, Patrick Hartwell and Joseph Williams, paired with the practical demonstrations each night by consultants who talked to writers in general terms about patterns of error without ever

putting a mark on a paper (or at most a check in a margin), gave my students a new way to think about grammar and punctuation.

But perhaps the most important lessons we all learned that summer go beyond all of these others. And that is that writing has to matter--both to the teacher and her students, because without a personal investment, what's the point? One of my tutors recently commented that she is always shocked and upset when she talks to a student in conference who doesn't care about writing, since she loves it so much. I couldn't help but mentally compare her enthusiasm to my own daughter's sixth grade teacher who said with impunity during parent night when asked to describe the English curriculum: "Writing! What can I say--you got your nouns, you got your verbs...."

Of course we want our students to care about their writing and to take it personally, and as teachers we must model that enthusiasm. Tutors are again a perfect guide. We select consultants for writing center work because they love to write and because they care about conveying that passion to others. Unfortunately, too many teachers, although charged with teaching students and evaluating writing, seem to lack the necessary respect for either. Once again, it didn't take much to get this point across. We watched as our university's tutors began every session with a handshake and a smile and maintained an air of friendly respect, even when this was difficult. We also read works by and about teachers who have themselves made a huge difference in students' lives, in turn motivating them to do the same. Specifically, we began the course with Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, and ended it with *The Freedom Writers' Diary*, which is an

incredible story of the transformative power of writing, told in the form of diary entries by high school students and their amazing English teacher Erin Gruwell. And, of course, we wrote and talked about our own literacy narratives, all the while wondering who our own Erin Gruwell was.

Not surprisingly, we did a lot of reflection throughout the course, and this reflective piece culminated with my predictable request for them to come up with a new Top Five list: Here's how it went, although actually there were now six:

*mutual trust and respect between teacher and students;
*_un_covering the curriculum (to borrow a phrase from James and Kathleen Strickland; by this the students meant that a good writing teacher spends time where needed and thinks beyond the curriculum as much as possible);
*writing as a way to grow as individuals and citizens;
*writing with an emphasis on process, revision, context and appropriate audience;
*vary the setting and nature of assignments and responses; and
*when in conference, listen more than talk, question more than answer, suggest rather than decree.

Since this is a story of discovery on the part of my students, it seems fitting to conclude this paper with the words of one of them. She teaches senior English at a local high school that many of our university's students come from--in itself a nice circularity--and was so excited by the Writing Center that she chose to do her final paper on both writing

center theory and the practicability of re-activating a center at her high school, one that had been started half-heartedly and quickly abandoned when the room became needed for something else. Her paper spoke movingly about the need for "inspiration and higher aspirations," "comfort," and a "non-traditional setting," where students, regardless of their writing level, could hone their burgeoning craft. But it was her final personal reflection that really spoke to me:

[This course] introduced me to ways to approach student writing that I never really considered. Since our class was held in the Writing Center, I could observe the comfort of the room and watch actual sessions while partaking of them myself. In addition, essays by Elbow, Sommers, Delpit, Rafoth, Black and others forced me to reflect upon the way that I approach, teach, and grade student writing. Instead of taking a teacher assigns-student writes-teacher grades-with-a-modified-process-writing-approach, I now understand the continual support, guidance, and feedback that students, or anyone really--need while writing. I want to help my students to generate new ideas, to listen to them carefully and offer fresh perspectives, and to remove the pressure of performing immediately, and to help them help one another to do the same. In the past I would listen to my fellow teachers complain about their students' rotten writing skills, and I must admit I often joined in myself. But the time has come to stop grumbling and do something! Thanks to my research I have a vision and a plan for a new Writing Center at [my high school]. It may seem idealistic, but I now have the confidence that I will be able to make the ideal a reality.

Her reflection confirmed for me what I sensed throughout this very special summer: that Writing Centers, far from deserving marginalization or devaluation, must be recognized for the enormous contributions they have the potential to make. And perhaps the finest of these may be to the present and future teachers of emerging writers of all ages.

Works Cited

Cazden, Courtney. *Classroom Discourse.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988.

Greenberg, Karen. "The Politics of Basic Writing." *Journal of Basic Writing* 12 (1993), 64-71.

Meier, Terry R. *The Social Dynamics of Writing Development.* Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Harvard University. 1985.

Selected Bibiliography

Beginning Writing Groups. Washington, 1988.

Black, Laurel. *Between Talk and Teaching: Reconsidering the Writing Conference.* Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1988.

Bouquet, Elizabeth. "'Our Little Secret': A History of Writing Centers, Pre- to Post-Open Admissions." *CCC 50 (*Feb 1999), 463- 482

Cogie, Jane. "Theory Made Visible: How Tutoring May Affect Development of Student-Centered Teachers." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 21 (1997), 76-84.

Elbow, Peter. *Everyone Can Write.* NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000.

The Freedom Writers' Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing To Change Themselves and the World Around Them. NY: Doubleday, 1999.

Gillespie, Paula and Neal Lerner. *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Tutoring.*

Hartwell, Patrick. "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar." *College English* 47 (Feb. 1985), 105-127.

Mohr, Ellen. "The Writing Center: An Opportunity in Democracy." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 26 (May, 1999), 419-426

Murphy, Christina and Steve Sherwood. *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors.* Boston: St. Martin's, 1995.

Rafoth, Ben. *Tutoring One To One*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000.

Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary*. NY: Free Press, 1989.

Ryan, Leigh. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*. 2nd. ed. Boston: St. Martin's, 1998.

Soliday, Mary. "Shifting Roles in Classroom Tutoring: Cultivating the Art of Boundary Crossing." *Writing Center Journal* 16 (Fall 1995), 59-73.

Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *CCC* 32 (May 1982), 148-156.